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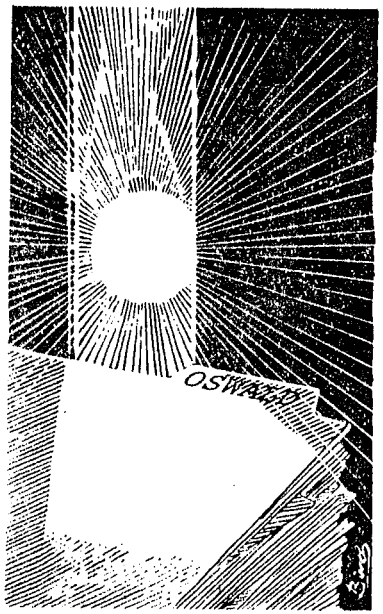

BY CHRISTOPHER BING FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Oswald File: Tales of the Routing Slips

Six Weeks Before JFK's Murder, the CIA Didn't Tell All That It Knew

By Jefferson Morley

THE U.S. government's fifth effort in 31 years to satisfy the public's curiosity and doubts over the murder of President John F. Kennedy is quietly getting under way in a federal office building on E Street in downtown Washington.

The JFK Assassination Records Review Board, a five-member panel appointed last year by President Clinton, is collecting and starting to make public government documents related to Nov. 22, 1963.

Jefferson Morley is an editor of Outlook.

The law creating the board requires the CIA, FBI and other government agencies to release virtually all of their files on the assassination. Even before the board was appointed, the CIA began releasing long-classified files to comply with the law. Since August 1993, the CIA has released 217,000 pages of documents, according to an agency spokesman.

Among those files, a historian and author has found materials that disclose for the first time who at CIA headquarters received detailed FBI reports about accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald in the months prior to Kennedy's murder. The routing slips on the newly released files show that some senior CIA officials who knew about the FBI reports failed to share the information with agency colleagues in Mexico City who were trying to learn more about Oswald six weeks before the assassination.

"We're finding that there are an awful lot of records that are at the CIA or at the FBI or at other federal institutions and agencies that people have never seen," says John R. Tunheim, the chief deputy attorney general of the state of Minnesota, who is chairman of the review board. "And whether the information in those records is relevant to ultimate

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The Oswald File

OSWALD, From C1

conclusions about the Kennedy assassination or not, at least everyone should have a chance to look at them."

Opinion polls consistently have shown that a majority of Americans are skeptical of the Warren Commission's conclusion in 1964 that Oswald acted alone. The subject has been revisited by the Rockefeller Commission in 1975 and the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1976 and reinvestigated by the House Committee on Assassinations in 1979.

Congress passed the JFK Assassination Records Act two and a half years ago to quell a new wave of speculation generated by Oliver Stone's conspiratorial movie epic "JFK." The film suggested that Kennedy was murdered because he was resisting escalation of the Vietnam War.

The routing slips that shed new light on the CIA's handling of information about Oswald before the assassination were found by John Newman, a 20-year veteran of U.S. Army intelligence who now is an assistant professor of history at the University of Maryland. The routing slips identify which counterintelligence and covert operations officers in CIA headquarters received the FBI's reporting on Oswald in 1962 and 1963.

The question of what the CIA knew about Oswald first arose in early October 1963 after the 24-year-old ex-Marine visited Soviet and Cuban diplomatic offices in Mexico City seeking a visa. On Oct. 10, 1963, officials at CIA headquarters in Langley sent a cable to their subordinates in Mexico, telling them that they had not learned anything about Oswald in the previous year and a half. But the routing slips show that at least one of the CIA officials who drafted the cable had, in fact, signed for two FBI reports on Oswald.

The Oct. 10 cable itself has been in the public domain for many years. It is also well-known that the FBI was monitoring Oswald's activities at the time. He was an obvious subject of interest to both the FBI and CIA during that period in the Cold War, because he had defected to the Soviet Union in 1959. Moreover, after returning to the United States in June 1962, Oswald had become active in a U.S. group that supported Cuba's communist leader Fidel Castro.

What is new is that the latest information on Oswald was not passed along to CIA officials in the field. On Oct. 8, 1963 the agency's Mexico City station sent a query to CIA headquarters, marked "routine," saying it had observed a visit to the Soviet Embassy by an "American male who spoke broken Russian [and] said his name [was] Lee Oswald."

Two days later, Langley responded. The cable was drafted by four operations officers and approved by the agency's deputy director of covert operations. It provided details about Oswald's past attempts to renounce his citizenship and become a Soviet. It also stated that the "latest hdqs info" on Oswald "was State [Department] report dated May 1962 saying State had determined Oswald is still U.S. citizen."

Just days earlier though, two CIA counterintelligence offices had received an FBI report on Oswald's recent pro-Castro activities, according to the routing slips. The CIA had also received FBI reports on Oswald in September 1963 and in August 1962. The information included an interview with Oswald and detailed information about his personal life and his political activities related to Cuba. These reports, according to the routing slips, had been widely distributed at Langley.

After the assassination, the CIA gave the Oct. 10 cable to the Warren Commission but did not disclose that the FBI reports on Oswald had been read by officials in the clandestine operations division in 1962 and 1963. The cable was described as a "summary . . . of the background information held in the Headquarters' file on Oswald."

In a recent statement, the CIA offered a different explanation. The cable did not mention the FBI reports, according to the agency, because it focuses "only on the status of Oswald's citizenship. As such it draws on information available from the State Department that bears on the question of citizenship. The cable is not regarded as an attempt to summarize all the information in the CIA files on Oswald at that time."

One CIA officer who helped prepare the Oct. 10, 1963 cable was Jane Roman, now retired. In a recent interview, Roman said that the CIA's latest explanation "may or may not be true—I see no reason why, if the information was available, it would not have been forwarded to Mexico."

Roman at the time headed the liaison office of the CIA's counterintelligence staff. The routing slips show that she signed for FBI reports on Oswald in September and October 1963. Roman said that she has no recollection of why the cable to Mexico City provided incomplete information about Oswald.

When shown the new documents, Roman suggested the FBI reports may have been circulating in other CIA offices and been unavailable to the cable's authors. But given how many higher-ranking CIA officials were involved in the preparation of the Oct. 10 cable, she said, it appeared that the withholding of information was deliberate.

"I would think that there was definitely some operational reason to withhold" the information, she said, "when you see how many people signed off on this." The documents, she said, are "indicative of a keen interest in Oswald [within the agency], held very closely on the need-to-know basis."

The CIA has always denied that it had any relationship, direct or indirect, with Oswald. The four previous government investigations have reached the same conclusion.

The combination of strong CIA interest in Oswald and a desire for internal secrecy suggests the agency may have had some kind of relationship with Oswald that it was trying to protect, according to Edward Lopez, a top Oswald researcher for the 1979 House investigation.

"What this [new material] tells people is that somehow the agency had a relationship with Lee Harvey Oswald prior to the assassination and that they are covering it up," says Lopez, now a Legal Services attorney in Rochester, N.Y.

The FBI has also begun releasing long-secret documents, including a batch made public last week, showing that Cuban leader Fidel Castro in June 1964 told a confidant within days of the assassination that Oswald threatened Kennedy's life while visiting the Cuban consulate in Mexico City.

The documents confirm a 1976 Washington Post story which revealed that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had informed the Warren Commission of the alleged threat in 1964. But Castro's story remains a puzzle to historians because the CIA's surveillance records of Oswald's visit to the Cuban consulate contain no indication of such a threat.

Newman, who discovered the routing slips on the FBI reports, is completing a book, "Oswald and the CIA," to be published this summer. Newman's previous book, "JFK and Vietnam," argued that Kennedy was preparing before his death to withdraw from Vietnam. That book, described by historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as "meticulous and exhaustive," led filmmaker Stone to hire Newman as an adviser for his controversial movie.

Newman cautions that definitive conclusions about the relevance of the new CIA and FBI documents to Kennedy's murder, if any, will be premature until the JFK Records Review Board finishes its work.

"We know where the answers to all of the questions about Oswald and the CIA are," Newman says. "They're in the files that the government hasn't released yet."

In an unprecedented move, Congress gave the board's members—not officials of U.S. government agencies—the authority to decide what records must be made public. The law requires the board to give priority to releasing files from the CIA and FBI. If the agencies object, they have the right to appeal within 30 days to the White House. The president then makes the final decision.